

2011

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Rebecca, "A Threat from the South: Venezuela's Hugo Chavez" (2011). *A with Honors Projects*. 40.
<http://spark.parkland.edu/ah/40>

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SPA 101-004
Melissa Leach
“A with Honors”
Fall 2011

A THREAT FROM THE SOUTH: Venezuela's Hugo Chavez

In 1810, Simon Bolivar overthrew the oppressive Spanish government in Caracas. Over the ensuing years, Spain and Venezuela and South America at large struggled back and forth, declaring independence and being conquered until at long last, Spain was completely vanquished in the new world. Simon Bolivar was a national hero and highly revered, something that has continued to this day. In South America, many leaders talk of him with respect. Besides numerous statues in his honor, one country- Bolivia- was even named after him. On the bicentennial of his birth, celebrations were held in his honor and many made pilgrimages to Venezuela, his homeland. Thus, Bolivar is an icon and an idol in most of South American culture. This is a strain of thinking that pervades South America, and one that Hugo Chavez takes advantage of at every chance. In a land of dire financial crisis and economic instability, Chavez has assumed the mantle of Bolivar, the savior of South America, and stepped out into the fray. This paper will discuss the circumstances through which Chavez came to power and the implications of his Bolivarian ideology.

In 1918, oil was discovered in Venezuela. Over the next several decades, its economy grew by leaps and bounds, keeping pace with other modern nations. Private companies, not the government, handled the flow of oil. There were few government-owned businesses, and corruption was only found in the highest levels of the government.¹ The cities were safe, justice was preserved, and the right of private property was sacred.² In 1950, Venezuela was rated as having one of the freest economies in the world, receiving a 1.5 rating on a scale of one to five, with one being best and five being worst. In 1960, the Gross Domestic Product of Venezuela surpassed that of Australia, Switzerland, and Canada.³ However, while Venezuelans enjoyed such economic success, things were changing in the government.

In 1950, the president of Venezuela, Marcos Perez Jimenez, nationalized the telephone company. This was the start of a destructive trend economically. More nationalizations followed over the years. The next president, Romulo Betancourt, struck out against private property with a massive land seizure that made the people on the land renters, not owners. Betancourt also devalued the bolivar, a trend that continues to this

¹Hugo Faria

² Hugo Faria

³ Hugo Faria

day. In addition to these changes, he tripled taxes, created a state-owned oil company and generalized the price controls. These standardized price controls caused the present-day slums.

The economic and political condition continued to worsen.⁴ The next two presidents, Raul Leoni and Rafael Caldera, passed legislation that drove up the cost of living and required businesses to have a majority of Venezuelans on the board. In 1974, Carlos Andres Perez became president. He nationalized the Venezuelan bank and took over more businesses, placing them under government control. These businesses included the oil companies. He also established several new state-owned and operated companies. All of these socialist practices further weakened a once-capitalistic economy. On top of all this, Perez rang up a huge debt.⁵

The next presidents, Luis Herrera and Jaime Lusinchi, did nothing to improve the economy and Venezuela's condition continued to deteriorate, touching even the once impartial judicial system.⁶ These two presidents could have reversed the destructive policies of their predecessors, but instead under Herrera, the bolivar was devalued further, and he instituted exchange-rate controls. When Perez returned to power in the late 1980s, he tried to improve the economy, but the economy was too far gone to make things better. He tried eliminating price controls and reducing trade constraints. To make matters worse, the following president, Rafael Caldera who was back for a second term, reversed many of Perez's changes, further exacerbating conditions such as inflation and taxes by seesawing back and forth from one economic ideology to another. All this turmoil paved the way for a new leader, a leader more manipulative and totalitarian than any Venezuela had yet seen.

Hugo Chavez was born to humble surroundings. Born in 1954, he was raised in poverty by his grandmother. As a child, Chavez's greatest dream was to play baseball. With this dream in mind, he enrolled in the Venezuelan military academy with hopes of eventually reaching Caracas to find his fortune and play in the big leagues.

While in the military, Chavez achieved the rank of paratrooper lieutenant and was sent out to fight the rebels. To his surprise, he discovered he felt a certain degree of admiration for them. Through his brother, he had a chance meeting with Douglas Bravo, the leader of the rebel forces. That encounter changed everything for Chavez and ultimately for Venezuela and the world. Bravo's charismatic appeal and personality won over the young lieutenant and Chavez was forever changed. Hitherto, Chavez had considered leaving the military, but now he stayed on, learning as much as he could and spreading revolutionist propaganda and learning guerrilla warfare and biding his time, just waiting for the right moment

⁴ Hugo Faria

⁵ Hugo Faria

⁶ Hugo Faria

to stage an uprising and overthrow the present government.

This opportunity came on February 4, 1992. Chavez led a failed coup, trying in vain to overthrow President Perez. He landed in jail for two years, before his popularity with the people pressured the president to release him. He returned to his old ways, planning how he would take over the government. Another revolutionary encouraged him to run for president and gain power legally. He took that advice and won the presidential elections in 1998 in a landslide, just a few short years after getting out of prison. Part of the reason for his meteoric rise to power was his physical appearance. Chavez looked like the masses, the disadvantaged small people of the barrios. His skin was brownish, not pale like the politicians who had systematically corrupted the government and ruined the economy. He offered a hope of change and new beginnings. Chavez was now in the seat of power, and he knew exactly what he wanted to do with it. He dreamed of big accomplishments—a united South America and the end of capitalism as an economic system.⁷

His popularity strong, Chavez has won the approval and love of most Venezuelans. At subsequent elections, he has seldom suffered any losses. His charismatic personality has won him many devout followers. By identifying himself with Simon Bolivar, he draws upon the popularity of Bolivar and adds it to himself. His strong nationalistic, anti-American rhetoric has driven the country to its current state of hostility towards the United States. Chavez incorrectly blames capitalism for all the societal and economic ills in Venezuela, creating a scapegoat for the actions of himself and his predecessors.

Blaming another country, ideology, or people group for ills that they have not caused is not a new trend. Down through history, rulers have found scapegoats for their own mistakes. Just as Hitler blamed the Jews for the ills of Germany, so Chavez blames the United States of America for the problems of Venezuela. This is a startling realization when one considers the scope and magnitude of the Holocaust and World War II. It would in fact not be too far to compare Venezuela now with the Germany of the 1930s and up to the point of America's joining the Second World War.

Consider for a moment Hitler, the leading cause of the whole World War II saga. Born to a middle-class family, young Hitler had only one aim in life, to be an artist. When he failed to gain admission to the art academy of his dreams, Hitler's life took a decisive turn. Instead of choosing to pursue another useful career, he chose to harbor anger and resentment and to blame others for everything bad that happened to him. This habit of denial of consequences and passing the blame made it possible for him to successfully deceive Germany and carry out his atrocities.⁸ By creating a scapegoat, the Jews, Hitler absolved the Germans of all guilt. Hitler assumed power at a time when the German economy

⁷ Brian A. Nelson

⁸ St. Clair McKelway

was crumbling, their pride was still stinging from World War I, and the humiliation of Versailles Treaty was still intense. Hitler offered them a chance to regain their pride and to once again be a military power as in the days of old. He stirred up their nationalistic pride with his hypnotic speeches and propaganda, in much the same way as Chavez does today. Hitler built up German defenses and turned Germany into a war machine.

This is a lot like what is happening in Venezuela. Chavez continues to amass weaponry at the expense of his people. At a time when many his people are living in poverty, Chavez is the one of the most aggressive buyers of military equipment in the world, out buying even countries like Pakistan and Iran, according to Simon Romero of *The New York Times*. Chavez's arsenal bristles with assault rifles, fighter jets, and helicopters.⁹ He hopes to also someday own nuclear weaponry, forging alliances with Iran to search for uranium in Venezuela. In addition to these warlike preparations, Chavez bears another resemblance to Hitler. Chavez has his own version of the Gestapo, or secret police. He continues to act in hostility through a constant stream of anti-American propaganda and through his controversial alliances. Best friends with leaders such as Fidel Castro of Cuba and Mahmud Amadinejad of Iran, Chavez assumes another similarity to Adolf Hitler. Hitler likewise formed alliances with other cruel despots, namely Mussolini and Stalin, hoping to conquer the world.

That seems to be perhaps the motive behind Chavez and his cronies. Hatred for the West in general and the U.S. specifically fuels their friendship and drives their ambition. After all, Amadinejad, a radical Muslim, and Chavez, a staunch Communist, have practically nothing in common except their joint hatred for the U.S. Together with Castro, who is a father figure to Chavez, what might the threesome decide to do?

To begin to grasp the potential threat, consider for a moment the events of World War II. Germany overran Europe very quickly. With the exception of a few neutral countries, continental Europe was completely subjugated in less than ten months. Acting in concert with Germany, Japan summarily attacked the United States on December 7, 1941. The U.S. declared war on Japan the following day and three days later, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. Lasting four and a half years, the war killed over 400,000 U.S. soldiers alone and injured many more.

These are very somber facts to consider. The American tragedies of World War II remind one of a very real threat to the United States' national security. If Germany and Japan can inflict such losses on the U.S. when they are so far away, what might Venezuela achieve if left unchallenged? Venezuela is just south of the United States, across the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, a neighbor practically on the

⁹ Simon Romero

doorstep. Chavez continues his hostile rhetoric towards the U.S. and to further stock his arsenals. Some people counter that Venezuela is in reality nothing more than a bluff, a puffing up of an imaginary threat, but no matter who is correct, the truth remains that Chavez is no friend of the U.S. He also does not hide this animosity. Singling out the United States' arch enemies to be his special friends and calling them brothers, Chavez is merely testing the waters to see how the U.S. reacts. He keeps pushing the limits, trying to see what the U.S. will do.

All of this hostility seems somewhat laughable, though, when one considers the fact that the U.S. is Venezuela's largest importer, at 59.3 percent of the country's exports. It is as if Chavez is literally trying to bite the hand that feeds him and his country. According to Kavon Hakimzadeh of the *Military Review*, "An oil embargo would hurt the U.S. but would cripple Venezuela."¹⁰

In conclusion, Venezuela is a country to be addressed, not a minor problem to be discounted. Chavez does present a security threat to the United States' security and needs to be addressed. The government should not misinterpret his intentions and take him lightly. This would be to follow in the footsteps of Chamberlain in the 1930s who tried to placate Hitler. The U.S. must be brave and handle the situation effectively, taking the first steps and not letting him have the advantage in any armed conflict that may arise. It should be of utmost importance to the U.S. and the free world at large to prevent Chavez from committing any acts of aggression.

¹⁰ Kavon Hakimzadeh

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